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White Studies Revisited: A Review Article

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Melanie Bush, **Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness**, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004, xxiii + 301pp

John Hartigan, **Odd Tribes: Towards a Cultural Analysis of White People**, Durham, Duke University Press, 359pp

Monica McDermott, **Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations**, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, xiii + 196pp

Karyn McKinney, **Being White: Stories of Race and Racism**, New York: Routledge, 2005, xxi + 270pp

Lois Weis, **Class Reunion: The Remaking of the American White Working Class**, New York: Routledge, 2004, xvi + 216pp

Introduction

In 1995 James Saynor felt able to write that 'It would be hard to imagine someone writing a book about what it means to white'. Such a remark seems quaint today. However, it remains the case that those authors who are addressing the topic often feel the need to assert the importance of whiteness against a wider audience that is perceived to be sceptical or indifferent. Paradoxically, the supposedly *new* field of White Studies is characterised by the argument that whiteness *still* matters.

The evidence that whiteness does *still* matter is overwhelming. The five books which I will critically engage in this review article are all based on the oral or written testimony of US-American working class whites and/or white students.

They all show how whiteness is significant in the way these people perceive their own lives, their neighbourhoods and other US-Americans. Although the material gathered by these authors is mostly qualitative, they also communicate some remarkable statistics. In *Breaking the Code of Good Intentions* Melanie Bush introduces survey evidence from Brooklyn College in New York. Brooklyn College is a diverse college in a diverse city. Yet, in answer to the question 'How often are you in the home of someone of another race?', 63% of her respondents answer, 'Never' (p.142). Just as revealing is the 1993 study (California Newsreel, 2003), Bush cites (p.4), that claims that '86 percent of suburban whites [live] in a community where the Black population was less than 1 percent'.

Yet to collect evidence that 'being white' has significance is not the same as saying that it is a discrete phenomenon which demands its own specialism. Indeed, three of the books under review (Hartigan, McDermott and Weis) centre on the inextricability of whiteness, class and gender. Another distinction may also be discerned. For whilst Bush and McKinney (and, to some extent, Weis) offer what I shall call 'corrective analysis', in which the statements of white people are judged (and often found wanting) according to these authors' progressive political templates, McDermott and Hartigan offer relatively few judgements of this sort. I shall be coming back to this distinction later, as it provokes a number of questions about the purpose and politics of White Studies. First, though, I want to do two things: critically explore the arguments about class and race made by Hartigan, McDermott and Weis; and examine all five books against a backdrop of racialised globalisation and the exercise of US-American global power.

White Studies, Class Studies ... and American Studies?

In 1996 I wrote a review article on another clutch of White Studies books (Bonnett, 1996). In that piece I looked at works by Allen (1994), Roediger (1994) and the activist journal *Race Traitor*, and contrasted their Marxian labour history perspectives with a book by Frankenberg (1993) on the contemporary and mobile *experience* of whiteness amongst a group of female interviewees. I suggested that these works offered two trajectories for White Studies: "Whiteness as an agent within the history of class struggle and Whiteness as a diverse, locationally contingent, experience' (p147).

If the books I have under review this time are anything to go by, a meshing of 'class' and 'experience' based approaches seems to have occurred. Weis, Hartigan and McDermott are all interested in explicating whiteness and class as social and cultural experiences. Their approach draws on a way of seeing class as a 'felt thing', a cultural identity (perhaps, a cultural construct) and marks a departure from White Studies labour historians' attention to class as a relational, economic and, above all, a political category. What interests Weis, Hartigan and McDermott are individuals' rationalisation of their own 'classed' and racialised

senses of self. Weis develops the point theoretically. She quotes Walkerdine *et. al.* (2001) in order to set out her own position:

I understand social class to be the “social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive and cope” ... Under this designation, class is “lived as an identity designation and not simply as an economic relation to the means of production”. (p.4)

Weis's *Class Reunion* draws on two overlapping data sets: 41 interviews from blue-collar 'Freeway' conducted in 1985-6 during a year long ethnography (and first published in *Working Class Without Work*, Weis, 1990) and re-interviews, conducted in 2000-1, with 31 of this cohort. The 'remarkable power' of such a longitudinal approach, and Weis's ability to integrate class, gender and race, are, appropriately enough, acknowledged by Paul Willis on the back-cover. Weis argues that.

the core hegemonic white working-class male identity offers a center around which individual white men move as they are propelled and propel themselves into their thirties. It is individual white male movement in relation to this core ... that 'determines', to some extent at least, a man's future position in the economy and community ... In contrast, white working-class female identity is *not forged fundamentally* in relation to that of a constructed black 'other' ... Ethnographic interview material reveals that white working-class women attempt, at times, to re-write wholly negative race scripts perpetrated by the working-class white men in their lives, actively interrupting such racist constructions through direct intervention with children or intentional undermining of racist messages handed down by their fathers. (p.156)

However, Weis is clear that the ability of women to 'interrupt' racism has its limits. Both men and women in her sample, she says, act together as a racialised class fraction to sustain white community, or 'white living space' (p.157), against perceived racial competitors.

I have termed this review a 'critical engagement'. I shall be exploring a number of areas of contention. One of these concerns the conceptualisation of class. For Weis's use of Walkerdine *et. al.*'s definition of class, in which a contrast is made between class as 'social and psychic practices' and class treated 'simply as an economic relation of the mean of production' is too staged and, indeed, anachronistic, to be satisfying. Its deployment of the straw man of Marxist economic reductionism makes it look as if what is being articulated here is as much a flight *from* something, namely Marxism and, more generally, the economic, as it is a movement *towards* something, such as a redefinition of class. It is certainly striking how little detail we get from any of the authors under review about their subjects' economic lives.

What we do find in *Class Reunion* (and, more implicitly, in *Working-Class White*), is an engagement with the interaction between white racialisation and the changing macro-economic context. It is on this terrain that Weis makes some her most original arguments. Her claim is that 'the American white working class' (p.9) have formed (or are forming) a '*distinct class fraction*' (p.3). This argument offers Weis the opportunity to assert that,

the American white working class is very much alive, having re-articulated itself as a distinct class fraction in the last quarter of the twentieth century. (p.3)

Since Weis does not define the category 'distinct class fraction' at all clearly her argument is more suggestive than analytic. Nevertheless, she uses this category to open out her enquiries onto the broader landscape of neo-liberal socio-economic transformation. Again, longitudinal ethnography give her findings considerable power:

Splitting along gendered lines as shaped and ultimately propped up by heterosexuality, white working class men and women reunite along race lines, producing, for the moment at least, a working collective which, paradoxically, serves in part to challenge increased globally driven demand for the neoliberal subject. (p.2)

it is privileges historically associated with whiteness, as well as continuing struggles around gender roles and definitions, that are key to the ongoing struggles of the white working class as it redefines itself as a continued distinct entity amid radical economic restructuring. (p.6)

The contradictory relationship between neo-liberalism and anti-racism is fully acknowledged by Weis. One of the intriguing ideas she is working with is that through the assertion of a racialised identity the 'white working class' are 'fighting back' against neo-liberalism.

While neoliberalism may demand unattached individuals – those who can move easily from place to place in the economy and consume as a result of their continual participation in this economy – thereby encouraging a cadre of 'de-raced, de-classed and de-gendered' individuals (Apple, 2001, p39), it is arguably the case that members of the former industrial proletariat are fighting back – insisting, on some level at least, on *being classed*, and certainly *raced* in spite of the fact that they increasingly enter and remain attached to the economy as *individuals*. (p.170)

One need not accept every word of this to realise that Weis is developing questions that are taking White Studies and/or Working Class Studies in a useful direction. However, I also feel bound to ask how, when Weis admits that 'national borders no longer define our economic fates' (Reich, cited by Weis, p.9), a

compound noun like 'the American white working class' can be abstracted and used to serve a seemingly discrete national narrative?

In my 1996 review of White Studies books, I drew attention to their US-American world-view. The US-American origins of White Studies, I suggested, have 'both enabled the contemporary debate on Whiteness and narrowed its critical optic and international relevance' (Bonnett, 1996, p.146). Over the past ten years the march of global events has been such as to make the internationalisation of 'race critical' research seem even more pressing. It is difficult to underestimate the way the 'war on terror' has changed perceptions of the global order for many people around the world. The fact that the books under review make only passing mention to 9/11 and subsequent international events made at least this reader wonder at the implacability of the familiar (and, perhaps, in some ways comforting) US-American national story of black and white 'race relations'.

Whiteness is a relevant but not an adequate category through which to engage a world where nationality and nationalism (perhaps, most notably, US-American nationality and nationalism) and religious and political values are starkly to the fore. I write this whilst on the radio President Musharraf is being quoted as claiming that the US assistant secretary of state, Richard Armitage, sought to gain Pakistan's co-operation in the 'war against terror' by setting out another prospect: 'Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the stone age' (cited by Goldenberg, 2006). This was an ethnicised encounter on a number of levels. But it was also an inter-national one: *US-American* visions and decisions are shaping, or seeking to shape, our world. The books under review make no claim to be covering international events. They are all very clear that their sphere of interest is the USA. Yet can US-American identities, white or otherwise, be understood today without an international frame of reference? There are structural connections between US-American global power, whiteness and US-American national identity. Put another way, the changing geopolitical context needs to be made visible because it impacts upon the formation of social identities (including racial identities) in the US (and elsewhere). One of the most obvious expressions of this impact is that the militarisation of the public sphere acts to create national solidarities that resolve (if only temporally) ethnic rifts. Imperial endeavour can have the same result, with the added effect of crystallising a discourse of modern national values against which other societies may be judged (ironically, 'good race relations' may be one such US-American value, see Bonnett, 2006).

Although both McKinney and Weis raise the issue of military service their emphasis is on its power to challenge young white men's racial prejudices. McKinney has a particular interest in the transformative moments that cause whites to question the racial order. Drawing on autobiographical data 'collected in college classes that I or my colleagues taught' (p.193) between 1998-2003, she notes that 'most of the transformative experiences including travel are of joining the military' (p.45). McKinney also describes how military training enables young

recruits to learn respect for other people. Fondly recalling his encounter with an African American female Drill Sergeant one ex-trainee notes 'Never in my life have I been screamed at and so degraded'. McKinney, with equal indulgence, explains that this experience 'disrupt[ed] his preconceived notions not only of African Americans, but also of women' (p.46). She tells us that, 'in diversity and affirmative action [the US military] has been one of the most progressive organisations in the United States' (p.45). These statements are not, as far as I know, wrong or even misleading. But given they are virtually all we are told, across these five texts, about the relationship between the US military and whiteness, they do little to disturb suspicions of an untimely insularity.

Disappointing White People

A consciousness of a sceptical audience is central to the way White Studies presents itself. The difficulties that this position suggests are, in part, resolved by an ability to call on a liberal-left or, more broadly, progressive, rhetorical repertoire and imagined readership. Adopting Weis's terminology, it may be useful to conceive of educated, public or 'helping sector' professionals as a class fraction (the formation of anti-racist radicalism in this class sector was analysed by Bonnett, 1993). If one does then the tone of disappointment and disapproval we find directed at working-class whites in a number of the books under review begins to take on a class dimension. Hence, the 'corrective analysis' practised by McKinney, Bush and, to some extent, Weis, may be presented as a site of fractionalised class conflict. It is conflict that has become increasingly discordant for, as all of the five books discussed show, reaction to accusations, or even discussion, of racism amongst whites is commonly characterised by cynicism and resistance.

McKinney takes the corrective approach furthest. For example, interspersed with her subjects' statements expressing doubts about affirmative action, McKinney devotes many pages to setting them right (chapter five). In another example, she finds a student trying to argue that 'blacks tend to "overreact"' (p. 123) to the word 'nigger' (chapter 4). Again this misapprehension elicits a long corrective response. If *Being White* were an anti-racist handbook McKinney's lengthy evaluations of her subjects' many errors might be welcome. But her stated aim is the *analysis* of the condition of being white. In this context, the purpose of McKinney's correctional imperative becomes allusive. Perhaps it rests on the understandable concern that without explicit judgement comes complicity.

Melanie Bush also adopts a corrective approach. However, Bush's clear activist intent and background lend a greater coherence to her project. Indeed, it is, perhaps, with self-deprecating irony that she cites one respondent telling her:

I'll talk to you, but I don't want another lecture. I know I'm not a racist, so why should I be labelled with something you think defines what I am? I would be happy to take on racists, and I do. –Joey, white male. (p.55)

Is it valid, though, to make a distinction between academic and activist involvement in anti-racist debate? It is a question that the five books under review implicitly but repeatedly throw-up. It may be claimed that any such division is impossible, inherently conservative and, by extension, that explicitly corrective engagements are both inevitable and serve a dual scholarly and progressive cause. By contrast, I would suggest that such a collapsing of roles is not always or necessarily productive for either of them (for it encourages distant, 'professionalised' forms of activism and judgmental, ineffective scholarship). Certainly, there needs to be a more open debate on this topic; for it goes to the heart of what kind of expectations contributors to White Studies have of their interventions or their intended readership.

The sense of one class fraction (educated, professional/creative, progressive) judging another (uneducated, unskilled and conservative) is most tangible in Lois Weis's *Class Reunion*. A number of Weis's discussions of her subjects' normative subjectivities have their own normative content:

distanced ... in thought and action from normative male white working class youth subjectivity – Jerry is now a middle schools science teacher ... Jerry represents an early departure from dominant white working-class masculine identity. Capable and pleasant, he is now piecing together a solidly middle-class lifestyle. (p.77-78)

In contrast to the inability of so many other white working class men to 'move forward' (p.143), Weis finds political reassurance amongst her female interviewees. For either gender, however, to 'move forward' appears to involve a refusal to 'languish' (p.144) and a determination to acquire higher education and enter professional employment.

It may be revealing that it is the two authors (Hartigan and McDermott) who seem to have worked most closely in and amongst their subjects that are the least inclined to be 'corrective'. McDermott's research for *Working-Class White* involved her working for a year as a cashier in convenience stores in Boston and Atlanta in two predominantly white working class areas, between 1996-1998. Of all the books under review it is this one that offers the most viscerally plausible 'view from the bottom'. McDermott's immediately recognisable portraits of dysfunctional urban environments show how people can be pulled into the kinds of decisions and emotions that can be safely eschewed in more comfortable surroundings. Referring to the trouble she had with a pair of young, male shop-lifters (one white, one black), McDermott recounts her pleasure at the fact that one of the them got a 'severe beating' by the shop owner:

One part of me experienced shock, and another part wished a similar solution could be applied to the other troublemaker. That I could wish for such a thing was itself a striking departure from the sentiments I held at the start of my work at the Quickie Mart, but weeks of being insulted and taunted with no recourse had left me in a vindictive state of mind. (p.115)

McDermott goes on to offer a picture of working-class white identity that acknowledges both white supremacy and that the lived reality of whiteness in the two areas she lived in was not always experienced as a position of domination.

In lower-income, racially mixed areas, white skin can serve as a liability in the job market, especially for low-skill jobs. An implicit assumption is that whites living or working in the area are damaged in some way; if they were 'real' white people, they would have moved up and out by now. (p.38)

Whites in the Crescent present a case of positive group stereotypes serving as a hindrance to members of the dominant racial group, whose situation is more typical of members of a subordinate group. (p.43)

Racism is beset with ironies. These ironies are becoming more pressing as a deracinating neo-liberalism, coupled with the political gains of a variety of activist movements, introduces an awareness of, at least, the possibility of social fluidity at both micro and macro scales. It is unclear what overall conclusions or implications flow from McDermott's ethnography. But it does present us with an unsentimental and convincing window onto a complex terrain; a landscape in which the presiding theme is a lonely, restless alienation:

So how does race play out at the corner shop? What is it about daily life on urban neighbourhoods that shapes the way people think about race? In both the Crescent and Greenfield a free-floating prejudice surrounds interpersonal relationships. Interracial encounters are almost always polite, or at least civil, and race seems hardly to matter. Yet all this can change in an instant – a rude exchange at the supermarket or a misunderstood exclamation can set the stage for an exuberant display of antiblack (or anti-African or anti-Haitian or the like) sentiment. (p.151)

The ethnographic component of Hartigan's ambitious book *Odd Tribes* arrives at a similarly unsettling conclusion. Hartigan's 20 month ethnography of three 'class communities' in Detroit is introduced after a set of historical studies on the cultural politics of whiteness. From the book's beginning Hartigan's anthropology offers resistance to racial reductionism:

Rather than confidently subordinate the non-racial to an ideological obfuscation of the truly racial interests at work in contemporary society, I think it is important to examine how racial subjects, interests, and

identities derive from fundamental cultural dynamics that also shape class and gendered social terrains. (p.6)

It is in the book's latter chapters, which examine narratives of anti-racism in Detroit, that this approach shows its critical bite, pitting Hartignan against what I have called 'corrective analysis'. In one incident he discusses the failure of an 'antiracist workshop' to engage local whites who had become concerned over a local's Academy's 'Afrocentric curriculum'.

In my interviews with whites in Warrendale, the antiracist workshop typically arose as an instance of how they had been confronted with the assertion that blacks could not be racists due to their generally disadvantaged and disempowered status nationally. These whites would easily spout this position for me: racism is equated with power; without power – institutional, political, or social – blacks simply could not be racists. They questioned this assertion by pointing, first, to the local political dominance blacks have achieved in the city, and, second, to the characterizations of whites by school officials and promoters of Afrocentrism associated in some manner with the Detroit Public Schools ...In my interviews with the two women who directed the workshop, they described being confronted by 'lots of rhetoric that was really hard to mush through' to get at what they believed to be the racist core of the whites' response to the Academy. This search for the tangled, submerged emotions and anxieties that animate whites generally in regard to race proved ineffective for the Warrendale whites I spoke with, because it made the workshop facilitators seem oblivious to the way class and power mattered in this particular situation. (pp.237-8)

Hartignan is describing a failure of communication. His account does not make for optimistic reading. Contemporary anti-racism can often appear ill-equipped to engage or understand the pervasive alienation and isolation that characterises contemporary societies.

Conclusions

Hartignan suggests that white people have 'grown inured to charges or discussions of racism' (p.5). This may be one of the reasons why White Studies, even though a new field, has to keep arguing that whiteness is *still* relevant. It is not simply that people (however racialised but, in a US context, most notably whites) do not see whiteness as important but, rather, that they regard debates on race and racism as predictable, replete with familiar rhetorical stances and political performances.

The books under review are all original interventions which, moreover, show considerable variation in argument and purpose. However, I have picked out a

number of commonalities as well as contrasts. Thus, for example, I have suggested that the distinction between labour history Marxian approaches within White Studies and the focus on whiteness as a mobile lived experience (Bonnett, 1996) has been resolved by Weis, McDermott and Hartignan, each of whom approaches racialisation as a class-based and gendered *experience*. As the habit of connecting identities takes root, other distinctions become clear or present themselves afresh. This review has raised questions about the intended audience of White Studies. Such questions also concern the construction of the author. The distinction between academic and activist, although rarely hard and fast and often usefully fluid, is a necessary one for both traditions. The kind of 'corrective analysis' that plays such an important part in McKinney's and Bush's approach (and, to a less extent, in Weis's) draws scholarship and political intervention into conversation. Yet, in the face of an 'inured' wider audience, such cross-fertilisation runs the risk of scripting activism into what many people are pre-disposed to imagine will be the baffling language of the professional expert.

The domination of qualitative methods in White Studies means that it rarely offers detailed discussion of the demographic profile of whiteness. However, in two asides, one in Hartignan and one in McKinney, we find an interesting statistical contrast. It is one that goes to the heart of what will happen to whiteness in the USA. Drawing from a study of 1990 Census data McKinney notes (p.217) that, by 2050, 53% of Americans may be white. Drawing on a study of the 2000 Census, Hartignan tells us that, by 2050, 75% of Americans may be white. The dramatic difference rests on the assertion that entry into whiteness is changing:

This reflects the fact that so many immigrants are able and choose to be white. Immigrants identifying as white on the Census include Iranians, North Africans, Russians, and Armenians as well as Central and South Americans. (Hartignan, p.7)

If being white remains a dominant, high status identity in the USA then it would seem likely that it will prove attractive to a whole array of migrants. In this way whiteness will be both profoundly altered and stay the same. The books under review here all tend to assume that whiteness currently has a 'structural' importance in the USA's social formation. Yet the portraits they present of the 'experience' of whiteness also suggest movement: of a new 'white working class fraction' in the process of becoming (Weis); of a terrain of 'free-floating prejudice' (McDermott) and 'tangled, submerged emotions and anxieties' (Hartignan). What I take from this is that whiteness is open to transformation. How anti-racists influence this process is dependent upon how well they understand it and who is prepared to listen.

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